

VZCZCXRO2531  
PP RUEHDE  
DE RUEHRH #3974/01 1421009  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 221009Z MAY 06  
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7694  
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 2619  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0558

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 003974

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DHAHRAN SENDS  
PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/21/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [PINR](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: BETWEEN OIL WELLS AND THE SEA: A POLITICIAN SHOWS  
OFF HIS DISTRICT

REF: RIYADH 3720

Classified by Consul General John Kincannon for reason 1.4  
(d).

¶1. (SBU) "Over there you can see one of Aramco's wells," Nabih Al-Ibrahim, a Saudi Aramco engineer and an elected member of Qatif's municipal council, told PolOff and PAO, gesturing to his left as the group drove down the main access road into his home town of Awamiya off the Dhahran-Jubail highway. "And on the other side there are Aramco pipelines. Can you believe the road is in such bad shape, when we are surrounded by so much oil?" Al-Ibrahim explained that Aramco had paved the road in the 1960s and contributed to the community in other ways, building schools and other infrastructure. "Then when government departments took over, Aramco was no longer permitted to undertake community projects. But the government doesn't do enough." Al-Ibrahim recently petitioned the Ministry of Transportation in Riyadh to expand and repave the access road, he said. "I brought them plans and explained why they should do it. I think they will fund it. But they should have done it a long time ago, without being nagged into doing it." Being an elected municipal council member, Al-Ibrahim noted, gave his petitions more weight. "I have always brought projects to the government, but now they know that I am an elected representative of my community, not just one person's voice."

¶2. (SBU) The story of Awamiya, as Al-Ibrahim told it to PolOff and PAO on a tour of the town, was one of population growth and government neglect. In the 1960s, the town had about 4 thousand inhabitants and consisted of a small, fortress-like warren of palm wood, coral, and mud houses, linked together by small streets and enclosed alleyways. There are 20 to 25 thousand inhabitants now, and, though parts of the old center remain, neighborhoods of apartments and villas are expanding in several directions. Growth is restricted on one side by the oil pipelines and on another side by an agricultural area known as the "ramaz." Al-Ibrahim explained that his vision is to promote development in a stretch of unused land in the direction of the coast, thus linking Awamiya up with a planned northern extension of Qatif. Oil may be a stumbling block: according to Al-Ibrahim, work on this planned extension has been stalled as "Aramco asked the King to halt all construction because there is oil underneath, and the King obliged." People who had bought land in this extension were appealing to Crown Prince Sultan, whose office had initially sold the land to an intermediary.

¶3. (C) Al-Ibrahim acknowledged that Awamiya had a reputation among Qatifis, who jokingly call it Falluja, as being tougher and more volatile than neighboring towns. "Maybe we have

always been this way historically, because we were on the edge of the oasis and were the first people the bedouin would attack. Even now, if our backs are put against the walls, we can be tense. But we are good people at heart." Relations between the government and the Shi'a had caused tensions over the past 25 years, Al-Ibrahim explained, with the problem compounded by the fact that the government has a minimal local presence. The only police station in Awamiya has never been staffed, and all local government offices are in the neighboring town of Safwa. While the town itself was relatively safe, Al-Ibrahim noted, the palm groves of the outlying agricultural area were a no-go zone at night, a gathering place for groups of young men from throughout Qatif. Another factor contributing to tensions in Awamiya, according to several of the women in Al-Ibrahim's family, was the religious conservatism of a segment of the population. Awamiya is home to Sheikh Nimr Al-Nimr, apparently one of the more extremist Saudi Shi'a clerics and whom the SAG recently detained (reftel). "He is my neighbor and my friend," Al-Ibrahim said of Al-Nimr, "but we approach things very differently. He speaks out strongly against the government and even against Sunnis. I prefer a more diplomatic approach."

14. (SBU) Al-Ibrahim expressed his belief that changing the designation of Awamiya from "village" to "town," a change which he was actively lobbying the Eastern Province's (EP's) governor to make, would bring greater government involvement and resources. "The ministries in Riyadh don't know what a place is like. When they decide on the budget, if the place is called a village, they won't give it any money. If it's a town, they will." Yet if Awamiya is a town, it is a small one. Al-Ibrahim took PolOff to a small farm near the town center where Awamiya's leaders gathered on Friday evenings

RIYADH 00003974 002.2 OF 002

"to make the important decisions about Awamiya." The group gathered that Friday included, in addition to Al-Ibrahim, a board member of the local charitable society, the president of the local sports club, the editor of a cultural magazine, and the "sharif" of Awamiya, a local leader in the somewhat uncomfortable position of being the government's liaison on security and police matters. Several were members of the Al-Nimr family, including Nimr Al-Nimr's brother.

15. (C) Comment and bio note: Al-Ibrahim was born in 1963. He received a BA in civil engineering from King Saud University in 1989 and joined Saudi Aramco as a project engineer shortly thereafter. He also has a private engineering office, managed by his younger brother, that undertakes projects in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the gulf region. He was elected to Qatif's municipal council in 2005, representing a district that includes Awamiya and several other small towns in the Qatif oasis. Al-Ibrahim is married to Mona Al-Faraj; they have three sons and one daughter. Al-Ibrahim has been to the U.S. several times, each time to seek treatment for another son, who subsequently passed away from a heart condition. Al-Ibrahim's extended family boasts numerous well-educated professionals; his father worked for 40 years at Aramco and placed a premium on his family's education. PolOff's and PAO's trip to Awamiya illustrated the diverse but close-knit nature of the Shi'a community, particularly in the smaller towns around Qatif. Western-educated professionals and more conservative religious leaders interact as neighbors in Awamiya, and their differences do not appear to have boiled over into sharp divisions. End bio note and comment.

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)  
GFOELLER